

# Questions & Research

**Why is the 5-8 grade level configuration accepted by middle school educators?**

- In New York State's *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs*, it is recommended that middle-level schools should "Contain at least three grade levels," and "Be structured to create close, sustained relationships between students and teachers." (New York State, 2000)
- New York State's curriculum outlines and assessment schedules are based on a K-4, 5-8, 9-12 structure.
- Many researchers and practitioners claim that 5th graders would benefit from inclusion in the middle school (Alley, 1992; Jenkins & McEwin, 1992), contending greater similarities between 5th and 6th graders and 7th and 8th graders (Alexander, Williams, Compton, Hines, Prescott, Kealy, 1968). Jenkins and McEwin (1992) concluded their study of programs and practices in three grade organizations (K-6, K-8, and 5-8), "Therefore, ...it is recommended that fifth graders be either placed at 5-8 middle schools or be provided with more appropriate curriculum in K-5 or K-6 schools" (p.13). (Research Summary #8, "Grade 5 in the Middle School," National Middle School Association, 1997).
- The 6-8 configuration is most preferred by middle level educators because it is more likely to include the key characteristics of recommended programs and practices for young adolescents. However, it was also found that 5-8 schools, although less numerous, were about as likely to have these characteristics as grades 6-8 ones. (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; National Middle School Association, 1997).
- Educators believe that at least three years in one setting helps to increase continuity of program, student affiliation

with the school and its staff, and a more personalized learning experience. Conversely, in a two year middle school, 50% of the student population is new every year. Students are either transitioning in or out of the school (Toepfer, 1982; Viadero, 1993).

- The time of transition to a new school is critical for young adolescents. Enormous biological, cognitive, and psychological changes mark the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence. Biologically, early adolescence is defined by the onset of puberty, a period of growth and development more rapid than any other phase of life except infancy (Berliner, 1993; Carnegie Corporation, 1989; Simmons & Blythe, 1987).

**Why is it advantageous for students to be in a school for a minimum of three years?**

- In studies of middle school student transitioning, it was found that the most dramatic drop in GPA was for students who experienced a school change between grades six and seven (Mullins & Irvin, 2000).
- Students thrive in a caring school-community. Continuity is an important construct in the creation of such an environment. Noddings (1992) describes continuity in the context of the relationship between teachers and students over time.
- Schools should be places where students know and are known by the adults. This comes with an extended experience (Alder, N.I. & Moulton, M.R. , 1998; Carnegie Corporation, 1989).
- Multiple and frequent school transitions hamper academic performance and student motivation (National Middle School Association, 1997).
- When comparing the academic performance of students who make two school transitions before reaching high school to others who had to make but one transition, it was revealed that the GPA of the "two transition" groups were consistently lower (Mullins & Irvin, 2000).
- In a recent analysis of studies of student academic performance following a transition to a new school, the

most significant drop occurred in the seventh grade when that was the first year of the new school experience (Mullins & Irvin, 2000).

- Findings of some researchers indicate that self-ratings of academic competence decline after transition (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992).
- The transition to the middle school is stressful for many students, especially girls, and can be accompanied by increases in psychological symptoms and declines in feelings of self-worth and in school performance (Fenzel, 2000).
- Adolescents experience stress when they are required to cope with multiple changes concurrently. The timing of school change with other life events may exacerbate the development of stress, adjustment difficulties, and problem behaviors (Berliner, 1993). Therefore, it is recommended that students have time to make the transition to the middle school before the onset of puberty, not in the midst of it (Berliner, 1993; MacGiver, 1990).

**Where are there similar school districts with a 5-8 configuration?**

- U. S.: 1300 5-8 schools
- N. Y. S.: 99 5-8 schools

Chappaqua, NY\*

Rondout Valley, NY

Westport, CT

Bernardsville, NJ

Upper Saddle River, NJ

Allendale, NJ

Old Bethpage, LI, NY

Fayetteville-Manilus, Syracuse area, NY (2 schools)\*

Jamesville-Dewitt, Syracuse area, NY

Williamsville, Buffalo area, NY (4 schools)\*

Nanuet, Rockland County, NY

Ardsley, Westchester\*

Byram Hills, Westchester\*

Hastings-On-Hudson, Westchester  
Mamaroneck, Westchester  
Pleasantville, Westchester\*

\* In group of top 25 performing schools on NYS 8th grade assessments.

### **How would Onteora students benefit from a 5-8 school?**

- There is overwhelming research to support the notion that small schools are more effective in creating personalized and intimate learning experiences for students. Moreover, it is more difficult for staff to identify, assess, and prescribe for student needs, especially in a duration of only two years.
- Parents are more likely to have siblings together in a single building with a four-grade middle school. Being in a school for four years allows students an opportunity to compare their developmental growth against younger and older students.
- Having the 5-8 configuration enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of curriculum articulation and staff communications during the middle school experience.
- Being in one place for four years allows students to settle in during a time when they need to attend to a change in academics, social growth, and extracurricular interests. Instead of worrying about orientation and transition during the critical 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade years, students will have already established a comfort level with the school's culture and organization.

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